

BLM News

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
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SAGEBRUSH MOWING BENEFITS WILDLIFE, REDUCES FIRE RISK

Sage grouse and other wildlife in the Owyhee area recently got a boost with the creation of an extensive “fuel break” that was done about 100 miles north of Elko, just west of Wilson Reservoir in October and November.

“Our purpose for creating the fuel break is two fold,” said BLM Wildlife Biologist Ken Wilkinson. “We want to protect the area from large wildfires like we experienced in 1999, 2000, and 2001; and we want to improve the wildlife habitat – particularly for sage grouse.”

The fuel break was created by mowing sagebrush and other vegetation in a 13-mile long strip that varies from 300 to 500 feet wide.

“The mowing was done in a zigzag “S” pattern instead of mowing in straight lines in order to provide cover for wildlife. The “S” pattern is less visually distracting as well,” Wilkinson added. “We also had the contractor alternate the rows – mow 26 feet, leave 13 feet intact, move over and mow another 26 feet, etc. This alternating pattern keeps some wildlife cover intact and also allows room for new plants to establish. The alternate mowing pattern also follows accepted Nevada sage grouse guidelines for habitat restoration.”

“We tried to make additional allowances for sage grouse in the area and mowed a 3-acre and a 2-acre block near a sage grouse “lek” or breeding display area that resulted from a small wildfire in the 1980s. The lek area was starting to get overgrown and sage grouse prefer breeding areas with short vegetation. We also seeded about 6 miles of the mowed areas with yarrow – which is a forb sage grouse like to eat. The initial efforts appear to be working right away as late one evening the contractor spotted about 50 sage grouse roosting in several flocks along six miles of the freshly mowed rows. This is important because it shows that the sage grouse are not avoiding the mowed area and several flocks have actually selected it for night roosting.”

“The project work also serves as a massive fire break,” commented BLM Elko Field Office Assistant Fuels Manager Ky Kinkade. “Breaking up the continuity of the fuels is

major benefit so that in the event of a major wildfire we don't get complete habitat loss.

We'd like to get a network of fuel breaks in the future to help protect the area. The more fuel breaks we have, the better. In the event of fire, the fuel breaks provide fire fighting anchor points."

Monitoring is planned this winter to see the effects that the new fuel break has on area wildlife. Additional mowing is planned for 2005.

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